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Thursday October 20, 2005

Comeback Kid

How Ibrahim Eissa, the bête noire of Egyptian journalism, went from journalistic pariah to the editor of Egypt's best-selling weekly By Ahmad Aboul-Wafa, Marwa Al-A'Sar and Issandr El Amrani
Photos by Issandr El Amrani

[laughing](#)

When Ibrahim Eissa was a child, his mother dreamed that he would sit behind the desk of Mostafa Amin, the legendary journalist who founded Akhbar Al Youm.

His father, an Arabic teacher, taught him to love language by reading to him night after night. Eissa published his first magazine, Al Haqqa (The Truth), when he was 11 years old. He had it printed in an old-fashioned print shop in his hometown of Menufiya and distributed it to schools and newsstands himself. When he was 17, he landed a job at Rose Al Youssef, where he rose quickly through the ranks and, after graduating from Cairo University, became the prestigious weekly magazine's youngest-ever editorial secretary.



The current issue of *Cairo* will not be out on newsstands this week. Although the full issue of the magazine is online as always, readers can also download a PDF version of the magazine [here](#).

From then on, his career in the state-owned press could have been virtually guaranteed. But Eissa chose a different path. Politically engaged (but hesitant to commit to a single ideology), he was faced with his first moral dilemma in 1990, only three years into his career at Rose Al Youssef. During that period, the magazine built its reputation on writers such as Eissa and on its willingness to tackle topics such as politics, religion and sex. In particular, it was highly critical of the Islamist movement and provided a platform from which leftist and nationalist writers could launch diatribes against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Gamaa Islamiya.

But the magazine, though politically engaged, was still state-run. When Egypt joined the international coalition against Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Rose Al Youssef toed the line and supported the government's decision. Eissa did not, and within a year he resigned from his position as one of the magazine's leading political editors to become its literary editor. A few years later, private publisher Essam Fahmi offered Eissa the opportunity to edit a new weekly newspaper with a foreign license. Eissa was Fahmi's second choice; Adel Hammouda, Eissa's colleague at Rose Al Youssef, had turned down the job, believing his prospects

would be better if he stayed.

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Thus was born **Al Destour**, arguably the most important publication to hit Egypt's newsstands since most of the press was nationalized after the July 1952 Free Officers' Coup. **Al Destour** was a novel product on the media scene in several ways. It was ecumenical, running opinion articles from writers across the ideological spectrum, from Islamists to Marxists. It also took an editorial line uniquely critical of the regime, with a particular focus on corruption among high-ranking officials, democracy and governance, and a hard line against normalization with Israel. But perhaps the most unique thing about **Al Destour** was that it delivered these ideas in a hitherto unseen manner: through a mixture of formal and colloquial Arabic that relied on humor, sarcasm and insinuation to break longstanding taboos. In 1995, when **Al Destour** was launched, Eissa became the country's youngest and most controversial editor-in-chief.

Al Destour was the first publication to openly criticize the parachuting of army generals into top jobs across the country. It was also virulently opposed to the Toshka land reclamation project, a pet presidential initiative and apoplectic about Egypt's collaboration with Israel, particularly when Benjamin Netanyahu was in power. The newspaper also had its critics, of course, and not only among the powers-that-be. **Al Destour** blurred the distinction between opinion and reporting, at times engaging in attacks of little substance against the prominent figures it loved to pillory. But its willingness to cross red lines—which got the paper's distribution delayed at the censor numerous times—encouraged other newspapers to take a bolder line or, in what became a common phrase in newsrooms, to destourize their articles.

But what got **Al Destour** closed down, in the end, was a letter it published. The letter, allegedly by the Gamaa Islamiya, was a death threat against three prominent Christian businessmen—Naguib Sawiris, Rami Lakah and Raouf Ghabbour. The publication of the letter angered many readers, who felt that **Al Destour** was inciting sectarian strife. But, according to Eissa, what shut the paper down was a direct appeal by **Sawiris** to President Hosni Mubarak, who subsequently had the newspaper closed by executive order.

That was in February 1998. For the next seven years, Eissa was persona non grata in the press. He tried—nine times—to start another newspaper, through both party and foreign licenses. Every attempt was shut down, including an effort to start a cultural magazine. Even when he wrote under a pseudonym (which still appeared under his picture) in a newspaper licensed by the tiny People's Democratic Party, the party was frozen before the paper's second issue came out. Eissa had become a journalistic leper; no paper would publish his work.

Gradually, the ban relaxed somewhat. Eissa was still allowed to write about the arts and literature, but editors were skittish about allowing him to write on politics. When the Dream satellite channel was launched, he was recruited to host its current affairs show, Aala Al Qahwa (At the Café). Although the program was very popular, it too caused a stir and the channel was pressured to drop Eissa from its roster of presenters. It was also during this period that Eissa began to write novels, but his not-too-subtly-titled debut, Maqta Al Rajul Al Kabir (The Assassination of the Big Man), was banned and confiscated by state security. He resorted to peddling the book to individual bookshops and newsstands himself. In any case, the book and subsequent novels were not well received by critics, and Eissa remains more appreciated for his opinionate journalism than his literature.

In late 2004, Ghad Party leader Ayman Nour approached Eissa with a proposal. Nour, who had just formed his party, was about to launch its eponymous mouthpiece. A former journalist, he wanted to stage a coup and hire the

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country's most controversial editor to guarantee that Al Ghad's message would have wide appeal. At the same time, publisher Essam Fahmi still wanted to restart Al **Destour** with Eissa at the top, which he thought was possible in light of the political opening the country was witnessing. Offered both jobs, Eissa chose Al Ghad—much to the alarm of the security and political establishment, which saw the Nour-Eissa combo as potentially explosive. According to this narrative, the security services made their move and had one of Al Ghad's vice-presidents, Mostafa Moussa (who currently heads Al Ghad's breakaway faction), fire Eissa while Nour was in jail earlier this year. Eissa fell back on his second choice. "They allowed Al **Destour** to be published to keep me away [from Al Ghad]," he says.

Since then, Al **Destour** has come back with a vengeance. It remains as iconoclastic as the original—perhaps even more so. With its distinctive layout, numerous cartoons and illustrations, engaged colloquial tone and abrasive humor, the new Al **Destour** has been welcomed by the public. It is already the best-selling weekly newspaper in Egypt. Its articles attack the government with whimsy and irony (in contrast to the foaming-at-the-mouth earnestness of official opposition newspapers in the mold of Al Ghad or Al Arabi). When Eissa came over to Al **Destour**, he also took over Essam Fahmi's other publication, the popular weekly Sawt Al Umma, after its previous editor-in-chief, Eissa's old colleague Adel Hammouda, left to start another weekly, Al Fagr. Since then, he has been running both newspapers and making regular appearances on the satellite television show Min Awul Sadr (From the First Line), during which he gives passionate monologues on current affairs. He is also busily preparing for an old ambition: turning Al **Destour** into a daily, which he hopes to do by the end of the year. Cairo slipped into this hectic schedule and met with the 40-year-old to discuss his comeback and the challenges ahead.

Cairo: The old Al **Destour** was banned in 1995 after great success, and here you come with a new Al **Destour**. What are the differences between the versions of 1995 and 2005?

Eissa: It's a 10-year difference. The old Al **Destour** was always subject to a censor, since it had no Egyptian license, while the new one faces no censorship. However, we face pressure after we publish, in the form of numerous, aggressive threats from security bodies. Yet it's our choice not to be subject to threats. Most importantly, the reader of the twenty-first century Al **Destour** is more childish! The 2005 Al **Destour** reader has to have pretty wide horizons of knowledge, enough to know what's going on around the world the minute an incident takes place. This reader's demands couldn't be met if we adopted the strategy of the 1995 Al **Destour**. We now use sarcastic language, mixing colloquial structures with formal Arabic. This really relates to the twenty-first century reader. Sarcasm has become an element in people's speech and the way they express their views about what's going on around them. In 1995, my readership was made up of young people, between 20 and 30 years old. Now I'm hoping to reach the 17-year-old reader. It's true that Al **Destour** is an opposition paper, yet it's meant to be joyful. The sense of humor comes out all over its pages. Also, cartoons are integral parts of the paper's editorial policy. Al **Destour** is simply trying to create a thought climate similar to that in which the youth live. Young people always use special language to voice their difference. In 1995, we had only one colleague who knew how to navigate the web, and we used to say "Wow!" and look at him like he was a space alien.

Cairo: You once told a web magazine that all papers published after Al **Destour** are unworkable imitations. Don't you think you're being unfair to some journalistic experiments that have appeared lately?

Eissa: I believe that any imitator is a loser. Many papers appeared after Al **Destour** and imitated its design and writing style. They didn't try to keep up in

terms of ideas. It was like photocopying it, not taking up its mission. We need to differentiate between a good paper and a journalistic experiment. There are many good papers now, but we can't consider any of them real journalistic experiments in the sense of causing controversy in the community by presenting something new and becoming a model that other papers follow.

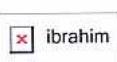
Cairo: What was the real reason behind the suspension of Al Destour in 1998?

Eissa: I believe there were 120 reasons, 119 of which we know nothing about. We were told that the suspension was a result of the statement attributed to an Islamic group that we published exclusively in a feature. That statement threatened some Christian businessmen. Adel Hammouda, who was deputy editor-in-chief of Rose Al Youssef at the time, published the same statement a few days later, and that was why he was punished and transferred to another paper. Interestingly, there was a feature published in the same edition that exposed the bribery scandal in police academy admissions. That alone could have led to the suspension of the paper, aside from the statement we published, yet nobody commented on it. Nevertheless, I believe the paper was suspended because we never eulogized Mubarak and because we urged other papers to do the same. We released 116 editions in the first era, none of which contained Mubarak's photo on the first page. Nor did we congratulate him on any occasion. We criticized him between the lines.

The new Al **Destour** is very bold when attacking the president and his regime. Also, if we look at the writers and journalists of the old Al **Destour**, we find that they belonged to different political trends: Communist, Muslim Brotherhood, Nasserist and others, representing a sort of national coalition. We discovered that we shared a common belief in the importance of the integrity of the regime, and we were all determined to confront corruption and tyranny. That was clear in the report of the press-monitoring unit [on press coverage during the presidential election campaign] of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. It showed that Al **Destour** was the most powerful anti-Mubarak paper. The old Al **Destour** increased the boldness of other papers, many of which eventually followed in its steps.

Cairo: How did you earn your living after the suspension of the first volume of Al Destour in 1998?

Eissa: Of course, I had financial problems. However, at the time I was heading the 1995 Al **Destour**, I always ate at qahwas. So my life requirements were not that much. I had no luxuries to miss after losing Al **Destour**. Even now, my biggest indulgence in life is to lie on the coach at home and watch Showtime. And I have always said that a real crisis may happen if I can't come up with the Showtime subscription fee! That's why I could adapt to the financial problems I faced. It is true I was depressed and frustrated at that time, yet two great things happened to me. The first was when I traveled to the United States. I was invited by the Center for Arab Studies at Georgetown University. I extended my stay there and visited all my friends who lived in the United States. During that period, I wrote the novel I mentioned before, Maqta Al Rajul Al Kabir (The Assassination of the Big Man). I lectured at Berkeley University. And I met the woman who is now my wife.



Ibrahim Eissa is back behind the boss' desk at Al **Destour** after an involuntary seven-year hiatus.

Cairo: You said that you are a self-made liberal. Does this have something to do with your holding the editorial position of Al Ghad newspaper?

Eissa: Until recently, I wasn't allowed to head any paper. Ayman Nour was

forming his new Ghad Party. He was planning to make use of Al Ghad newspaper and me as the media power, while he would be the political power. He offered me the job and I accepted it. Due to the external pressure on the Mubarak government, especially from America, the Ghad Party was approved. On the other hand, Al **Destour** won a final verdict from the Supreme Administrative Court, and was to be published again in April 2001. Yet the verdict was never put into effect. The security bodies had concerns regarding the issue. If I headed Al Ghad with Ayman Nour as the head of the party, that would form a combined political and popular weight. So they allowed Al **Destour** to be published to keep me away from the Ghad Party. Ironically, the two decisions were issued the same day. In December 2004, I had the two letters of assignment as editor-in-chief of both Al **Destour** and Al Ghad. However, I chose Al Ghad. I thought the Ghad Party promising and ambitious. Ayman Nour was quite enthusiastic and I got to know most of the leaders of the party (the ones who resigned later), and most of them are very respectable people. Also, I know how Egyptians think. People may have thought that I would go back to Al **Destour** out of nostalgia. I was very eager to produce a daily newspaper, and I felt I had enough experience with weekly papers. Then came the Ayman Nour trial and the conflicts inside the party and the party vice president's decision—in coordination with the security bodies—to lay me off.

Cairo: What was Ayman Nour's reaction at that point?

Eissa: Ayman Nour has his own political calculations. Later on he asked me to head the paper once again. Yet I realized that his party is not the great and powerful party I thought it to be. All the leaders whom I respect, like Mona Makram Ebeid and Mohammed Mansour Hassan, resigned. I found out that Ayman Nour couldn't lead the party in a politically mature manner. He's got the spirit of a demagogue rather than a person who thinks logically and wants to do something influential. I maintained my friendship with him, but decided to get back to Al **Destour**.

Cairo: But how do you manage your time between the two weekly papers and your TV shows?

Eissa: I dedicate most of Wednesday, Thursday and Friday to Sawt Al Umma, Saturday, Sunday and Monday to Al **Destour** and Tuesday to presenting my TV shows. I also depend on [executive editor-in-chief Wael] Al Ibrashi and I follow up with him. Yet for me, Al **Destour** is top priority. Starting in November 2005, Al **Destour** will turn into a daily newspaper. Al **Destour** doesn't depend on the work of individuals. There is an editor for each section, and the spirit of teamwork prevails. Most of Al **Destour**'s leaders are young people. I'm actually the oldest member of the Al **Destour** family.

Cairo: How do you evaluate the current state of the Egyptian press?

Eissa: The Egyptian press is gradually collapsing. It's like a person putting a barrel in his mouth. It's still confining itself within the boundaries of what officials say. Due to the lack of sources, it doesn't depend on accurate data or provide informative articles. So papers turn into producers of official statements and fake news. Many journalists have turned into salespeople, just selling ads. Most opposition party papers are like political newsletters. There is a glimmer of hope; the appearance of twilight doesn't necessarily mean that sunset is approaching! The only successful examples, in my opinion, are foreign and English-language papers published in Egypt. They rely on style, logic and data and they know their readership very well.

Cairo: What's your opinion of the people's reactions to the political changes Egypt is currently witnessing, which come mainly in the form of demonstrations and protests against the political leadership?

Eissa: The Egyptian people have been hiding their true feelings toward the pharaoh for 7,000 years. There is a space of awareness that's opened lately. But I'm still not that optimistic. What has been steadily ruined over the past 52 years can't be fixed in a year or two.

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